

*Histoire Vraysemblable: Medieval French History in Transition*

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It has become a commonplace among students of historiography that the sixteenth century marks a revolution in European, particularly in French, history writing. In its simplest form this view holds that in this period scholars began to abandon the outdated conventions of medieval annals and chronicles. In their place, they adopted the stylistic and critical norms of Renaissance humanistic scholarship. The result was an entirely new approach to the evaluation, interpretation, and presentation of historical evidence.

Over a century ago Gabriel Monod labeled the two principal aspects of this movement “rhetorical” and “erudite” humanist historiography. Rhetorical historiography made its Northern European debut in the last decade of the fifteenth century when Robert Gaguin and Paolo Emili both began their attempts to recast the centerpiece of medieval French history, the *Chronicles of Saint Denis*, according to humanist classicizing tenets. The introduction of rhetorical humanist historiography was a process of which many literate Frenchmen of the time were aware. Comments and appreciations began to appear even as Gaguin and Emili strove to finish their new histories. The modern scholarship on the subject is rather extensive, and has been with us for some time.

In contrast, the development of erudite historiography in France is somewhat more obscure, and the scholarship on the subject is comparatively recent. During the last three decades a number of scholars, mostly in the Anglophone world, have asserted that the development of critical philology and scientific chronology produced a new discipline which entirely superseded history as it had been understood before. Where the contributions of the rhetorical school, concerned almost exclusively with issues of composition and style, had been ephemeral, those of the erudite prefigured and influenced the later development of French historical scholarship. The incorporation of this interpretation by Blandine Barret-Kriegel into her massive survey *Les Historiens et la Monarchie* seems to have provided it something of a Gallic imprimatur.

Behind the idea of a sixteenth-century revolution in historiography, I believe, lies a second and somewhat older commonplace,

that the Middle Ages were entirely, or almost entirely, lacking in what has come to be called "the critical spirit." If we accept this notion, then the efforts of sixteenth-century erudites to establish standards of historical criticism must by definition represent a complete rupture with the past. If, on the other hand, we can demonstrate that scholars in the later Middle Ages had already begun to grapple successfully with critical issues, particularly with problems of source valuation and criticism, we must reconsider the originality of the sixteenth-century historical revolution. We must consider to what degree the historians of sixteenth-century France, particularly those of the erudite school, inherited and fulfilled a medieval tradition of historical reasoning and discourse.

Bernard Guenée, in his study of the culture of medieval historical scholarship, asserts that some critical glimmerings can already be found in works written in the early twelfth century. By that date, he states, a few "brave souls" might briefly state why a particular source appeared suspect. But, he adds, none would clearly articulate the principles on which these judgments were based. Before this, the most common procedure where sources were in conflict was to list the different interpretations without comment. Guenée believes that such a critical principle can be found in the notion of *vraisemblance*. This was not verisimilitude as it is presently understood, a matter of merely having the appearance of truth. Rather, it was an almost moral criterion having to do with fit and seemly behavior. A story which lacked verisimilitude, however reputable its source, thus fell outside the "natural order of things" and did not deserve credence.

Is Guenée here describing a passing scholarly fad of no particular significance to the history of historiography? Or has he identified the original manifestations of a trend toward historical method which would bear fruit in the sixteenth century? By examining the role of verisimilitude as a critical concept in two historical works composed near the end of the medieval period we may get a feel for whether there was a nascent critical spirit in French historical studies quite independent of the two humanist schools. Neither the *Mer des histoires* nor the *Mirouer historial de France* is a work of great originality. They are, however, representative of the rather large class of medieval French-language historical works which were made known to the sixteenth century when they were printed during its first few decades. By comparing the role of verisimilitude in these earlier works with the use made of it by scholars of the later sixteenth century, we should be able to determine if

the connection between the two periods is a direct one.

The anonymous compiler of the *Mer des histoires* was inspired to undertake his work, at least according to his own account, by the coronation of Charles VIII in early September of 1483. By the time of the new king's entry into Paris some weeks later, the compiler had written his way from the Creation to the early Merovingian era. The work was first printed, in two large volumes, five years later. His rapid progress can be explained by the fact that the work was by no means new, but a translation and revision of the thirteenth-century *Rudimentum novitiorum*. The compiler of the *Mer des histoires* preserved the structure and, it appears, most of the matter of the *Rudimentum*, including its disquisitions on universal chronology. His principal contribution, after turning the original work into French, was to insert lengthy additions on the history of his own country, on which he found the original surprisingly mute.

The compiler demonstrated some critical awareness of contradictions among the sources he incorporated into his expanded narrative, particularly in the area of chronology. He discussed these at the outset of his work in order to, as he put it, "point out the ambiguity and diversity which is among the several historians and doctors. . . ." Having warned his readers that they would find "discrepancies" in the book, he made slight effort to resolve them.

His additions from the national chronicles demonstrate only a relative willingness to judge the reliability of his sources. He begins his insertion on the origins of the Franks with the statement, common since the seventh century, that they first emerged in Franconia. He elaborates on this statement by mentioning that "others who have seen more of the chronicles of France" trace the origins of the Franks back to the Trojans. Finally, he adds that still others "hold to other judgments" and repeats the rumor current since the fourteenth century that the kings of France were descended from a Parisian butcher named Franco.

His approach demonstrates an uneasiness as to how sure our knowledge of the past can be. "Souls know nothing of what transpires in the world," he states, "except conjecturally." However, this ambiguous statement also points to a way out of this dilemma. Conjectural statements, provided they were controlled by a concept of fit or natural behavior, could reasonably be used to throw light on obscure or distant events.

The roughly contemporary *Mirouer historial de France* demonstrates an attitude toward sources which is considerably more

aggressive than that found in the *Mer des histoires*. Initially completed in 1452, the *Mirouer* appears to have been thoroughly reworked more than once before it was finally printed in 1516. These later hands not only continued the work, but interpolated into its earlier chapters materials largely taken from newly available printed works. These include materials from Gregory of Tours and Vincent of Beauvais, from recent works of Gallic erudition including that of Jean Lemaire de Belges, and from the Italian antiquarians Flavio Biondo, Raphael of Volaterra, and Sabellicus.

Despite these additions and the attendant reworking, the *Mirouer historial* remains a thoroughly medieval, and thoroughly French, piece of history writing. It is prefaced by discourses on the angels deputed to protect the kings of France and on figurative interpretations of the armorial bearings of France. Like the *Chronicles of Saint Denis* and much of the literature they inspired, it is organized by the reigns of the kings of France and pays particular attention to the chivalric deed and the telling anecdote.

After the introductory disquisitions the *Mirouer historial* goes straight to the issue of discriminating among sources. The chapter on the origins of the French begins with the following perceptive complaint: "to have perfect knowledge of things so ancient, and so long a time past as the origins of the French, may be an extremely difficult issue. Which cannot easily be proven or verified, as much for the diversity of authors who have written of it as from the great passage of time." The way out of this quandary, we are informed, is "by following the most sound and complete portions of these authors. And I will strive with my strength to include in this treatise that which will appear to be most consonant with truth. And to reconcile or cast out the various opinions of the authors, if it can be logically deduced, in order to have a full and complete understanding of this matter."

The *Mirouer historial* does, to a certain extent, make good on its promise to compare and judge the testimonies of its sources. The discussion of the origins of the name "Franks" begins in typically medieval fashion ("Some say that . . . , others say to the contrary . . ."). However, the traditional etymologies of the name, which date it to the reign of the emperor Valentinian, are then compared and found unconvincing. Neither is *vraysemblable*. The name, we are told, must be far more ancient. In a similar spirit, the early sixteenth-century editor weighs the opinions of Gaguin on the origins of the Franks against those found in the *Chronicles of Saint Denis*, the Trojan chronology of Jean Lemaire against that of Sabellicus.

None of this may be particularly rigorous scholarship by present-day standards, but it does indicate a willingness to entertain various interpretations of historical fact and to weigh them against each other and the author's own standards of what is credible. As such, it stands in sharp contradistinction to the approach of rhetorical historians such as Gaguin and Emili, who followed the early humanist technique of adopting only a single source for each succeeding chronological portion of their narratives.

But where does this French approach come from? As early as the 1490s, Sabellicus had advocated verisimilitude as a principle for resolving discrepancies between ancient histories. But French scholars, including the compiler of the *Mer des histoires*, had already begun to employ verisimilitude as a critical concept by this time. The last editor of the *Mirouer historial*, therefore, reached back beyond the innovations of the humanist school to an older, indigenous, school of historical criticism.

Recent scholarship has located the origins of the erudite school of historiography in the reception of humanist philology, particularly its techniques and critical *aperçus*, by French history-writers during the last few decades of the century. In its most emphatic formulation, this interpretation asserts that conjecture first emerged as a technique of textual emendation, a last resort attempt to restore the original reading of a text based on the redactor's literary knowledge and taste. The principle difficulty with this interpretation is that it traces the first importation of conjecture from textual criticism into historical research to the 1530s, in Beatus Rhenanus' *Res Germanicae*. Given that the notion of conjecture had already been applied to historical scholarship in France at least by the appearance of the *Mirouer historial*, this seems a less than satisfactory explanation. However, it may well be that the prestige of philology in general, and of Beatus Rhenanus's studies in particular, made the historical use of conjecture respectable in the mid-sixteenth century.

While one need not go as far as Guenée, who suggests that verisimilitude is somehow a "primordial" concept, I would like to suggest that the words "conjecture" and "verisimilitude" had already been in the air for some time at the beginning of the sixteenth century. As they were used by historical scholars of the period, the terms have neither a philological sense nor a meaning drawn from formal logic. They have, rather, a commonsensical, forensic significance. We find them linked, in a juridical context, as early as the mid-fourteenth century, when Philip VI issued let-

ters to two of his councilors ordering them to investigate a civil disturbance, and to take and imprison "all those whom you find culpable, of bad reputation, or suspect by verisimilar conjectures."

However, many sixteenth-century erudites tended to mistrust both conjecture and verisimilitude. They were unreliable, as both François de Belleforest and Lancelot Voisin de la Popelinière pointed out. They were also terribly old-fashioned, the tools of ignorant monks and barbarous historians. Guy Lefèvre de la Boderie, ironically one of the century's more enterprising fabulists, announced in the "Advertissement" to his *Galliade* that he was not interested in *vraysemblance*, since he had produced a work of true history. Certainly, conjecture could be badly abused. The historical fantasist Noel Taillepied defended the method behind his rather startling treatise on Druidic antiquities with the dictum: "Where the record is not sufficient, conjecture is permitted." To which, in one copy, a later erudite has added the note: "This is a method for multiplying fables."

This does not mean that conjecture and verisimilitude had outlived their usefulness to the scholar by the late 1500s. Sixteenth-century theory of historical criticism, Julian Franklin asserts, first arose in response to the Renaissance revival of Greek skeptical thought and its application to historical knowledge. The new pyrrhonists suggested that, strictly speaking, certain historical knowledge is impossible. Franklin singles out Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim as the most influential of the skeptics in this debate. Agrippa, whose attack on all the arts and sciences of his day was often crude and indiscriminate, asserted that all historians are liars. Some lie through negligence and credulity, others through the active invention of fables. Agrippa placed the great chroniclers of the French Middle Ages, Sigebert of Gembloux, Gregory of Tours, and Reginon, along with Gaguin and Emili, among the inveterate fabulists and flatterers of princes. Pyrrhonism challenged the historian, Franklin suggests, to articulate how any historical statement might be considered either true or useful.

The pyrrhonist demand for certain historical knowledge was, of course, an unreasonable one. The most effective response was to insist, not on absolute knowledge of historical fact, but on the utility of probable knowledge. Conjecture offered this degree of probable knowledge when it was controlled by a demand for verisimilitude. In his 1559 monograph on the customs of the ancient Gauls, the logician and controversialist Pierre de la Ramée demonstrated both the uses to which conjecture could be put and its

relationship to more certain forms of knowledge. Compared with Beatus Rhenanus's cautious comments on the subject in the first book of his *Res Germanicae*, Ramus' attempt to reconstruct an ancient society based on a conjectural reading of Caesar is an ambitious one. However, he recognizes limits to the method. Discussing what form of writing the Gauls might have used, Ramus dismisses the question of who invented writing as unreasonable, incapable of being answered in any sensible way. As for the question of the origin of the Greek alphabet, which Caesar says the Gauls employed, Ramus offers the story of Cadmus from which, he says "one may conjecture that letters came from the Galates to the Greeks." However, "verisimilar conjecture" can never provide a historian "certain proof by account and story of the age."

A more homely description of this form of conjecture can be found in the work of Cornelius Agrippa's French translator, Louis Turquet de Mayerne. Turquet de Mayerne was by no means among the front rank of the historical thinkers of his generation, and we should not look to him for an original formulation on method. However, he was something much more useful to the historian of historiography, a highly intelligent reader of the works of his contemporaries, with a nose for the controversial and the fashionable idea. In the introductory paragraphs of his later *Histoire Générale d'Espagne* Turquet de Mayerne complained, as did many of his contemporaries, that many historians had spoiled their work through fruitless conjecture, particularly about remote periods. However, he added, this does not mean that these periods were entirely inaccessible. The discriminating scholar will proceed "by probable conjectures, to a way passable. This is allowed them, so as they do it by constraint, and with judgement; remembering that a good huntsman can judge a wolves footing from a dogs, which are something like." This is patently not conjecture in its philological sense, but verisimilitude, the "sound opinion" on historical events advocated by the *Mirouer historial*.

Although erudite historians of the later sixteenth century continued to express doubt as to the value of conjecture and verisimilitude as critical tools, most found them too valuable to abandon altogether. Belleforest, perhaps the most vocal critic of the old histories, was not above using verisimilarity to judge whether the Franks had battled the Romans near Cologne. Du Haillan, in his monumental *Histoire Générale de Roys de France* of 1570, listed conflicting opinions on the origins of the French, French language, and French law before awarding his approval to the most trustwor-

thy. Nicholas Vignier, the late sixteenth-century historian of history, endorsed the conjectures of several provincial erudites on the origins of the Burgundians on grounds of their verisimilarity.

The career of *vraysemblance* and the linked concept of historical conjecture appears to extend back beyond the introduction of humanistic methods to history writing in France. Medieval experiments with *vraysemblance* appear to have been transmitted to French erudites of the sixteenth century through the process of revising and printing them. The reason for their persistence late into the century seems to boil down to their sheer usefulness, as their defense by Ramus and Turquet de Mayerne indicate. Similar methods became popular among English historians and antiquarians of the next century in large part because they recognized the uses of probability and conjecture, especially in investigating events for which there was little literary evidence.

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### Notes

- 1 Gabriel Monod, "Du progrès des études historiques en France depuis le XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Revue Historique* 1 (1876): 5-38.
- 2 Augustin Renaudet, *Préréforme et humanisme à Paris pendant les premières guerres d'Italie (1494-1517)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1916); Katherine Davies, *Late XVth Century French Historiography, as Exemplified in the Compendium of Robert Gaguin and the De Rebus Gestis of Paulus Aemilius*, diss., U Edinburgh, 1954.
- 3 Julian H. Franklin, *Jean Bodin and the Sixteenth-Century Revolution in the Methodology of Law and History* (New York: Columbia UP, 1963); Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship: Language, Law, and History in the French Renaissance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1970); George Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History: Historical Erudition and Historical Philosophy in Renaissance France* (Urbana: UP of Illinois, 1970); Blandine Barret-Kriegel, *Les Historiens et la Monarchie*, 4 vols. (Paris: PUF, 1988).
- 4 Huppert 3-11.
- 5 Marian Rothstein, "When Fiction is Fact: Perceptions in Sixteenth-Century France," *Studies in Philology* 83 (1986): 359-75, in contrast to this study, has laid out the rhetorical functions of the concept of verisimilitude in the French-language historiography of the period, and its relationship to the affective element in historical composition.
- 6 Bernard Guenée, *Histoire et culture historique dans l'occident médiéval* (Paris: Aubier Mantiagne, 1980) 130-31.
- 7 *La mer des histoires*, 2 vols. (Paris: Magdaleine Bourcette, Veuve de Francoys Regnault, 155[0]).
- 8 *Les mer des histoires*, vol. 1, fo. [4r]: "Pour monstrier lanbiguite & diversite que est entre plusieurs hystoriens & docteurs / & pour oster lerreur que aucuns a cause dicelle pourroient avoir touchant la cotation des ans de la reation du monde en cuydant & jugeant que en ce livre y eust aucunes contradictions nul ne doit ignorer qu

touchant ce ny ait grande repugnance & diversite d'opinions.”

<sup>9</sup> *La mer des histoires*, vol. 1, fo. 65r: “Les autres qui on plus veu des croniques de France dit . . . ;” “les autres baillent autre raisons pour dient qu France a est ainsi denommee dung bouchier dit Franco qui fut roy a Parie: pour laquelle cause les bouchier son fort privilegiez.”

<sup>10</sup> *La mer des histoires*, vol. 1, fo. 27v: “Les ames ne cognoissent point ce qu’il se fait au monde sinon conjecturalement.”

<sup>11</sup> *Le Mirouer historial de France* (Paris: Galliot Du Pré, 1516).

<sup>12</sup> *Le Mirouer historial*, fo. 5r: “Et combien que pour . . . avoir parfaicte intelligence des choses si antiques / et de si long temps passees comme de l'origine des francoys soit chose tres difficile / laquelle ne se peult facilement prouver ne veriffier / tant pour la diversite des aucteurs qui de ce ont escript que pour la grande revolution des temps / touteffoys en ensuivant la plus saine et entiere partie desditz auteurs / et ce qui semblera estre plus conforme a verite / mefforcere a mon pouvoir / rediger en ce present traictie et accorder / ou reprouver les opinions diverses desditz auteurs pour icelle sil logistiquement desduites / avoir pleine et entiere cognoissance de ladicte matiere.”

<sup>13</sup> *Le Mirouer historial*, fo. 6r: “Aucuns disent que icelluy Valentinian les appella francoys / cest a dire gens plains de ferocite. Les autres disent au contraire que pour la remission du tribut furent ditz francoys / cest a dire francs et non tributaires laquelle ethimologie de nom nest vraysemblable.”

<sup>14</sup> *Le Mirouer historial*, fo. 6r; 6v-7r.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: UP of Chicago, 1981) 83.

<sup>16</sup> John F. D'Amico, *Theory and Practice in Renaissance Textual Criticism: Beatus Rhenanus Between Conjecture and History* (Berkeley: UP of California, 1988) 24, 80, and 204. D'Amico asserts the French historians of the late sixteenth century as the true successors of Rhenanus.

- 17 Guenée 131.
- 18 Augustin Thierry, ed., *Recueil des monuments inédits de l'histoire du Tiers Etat*, Sér. 1 *Région du Nord*, vol. 4 (Paris: Didot Frères, 1870) 136-37.
- 19 François de Belleforest, *Les Grandes Annales et Histoire Generale de France* (Paris: Gabriel Buon, 1579), vol. 1, fo. B3r; vol. 2, fo. [chas. viii]; Lancelot Voisin de la Popelinière, *L'Histoire des Histoires* (Paris: Marc Orry, 1579) 16; Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie, *La Galliade*, quoted in D.P. Walker, "The Prisca Theologica in France," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 17 (1954): 216, n. 9.
- 20 Noël Taillepied, *Histoire de l'estat et republique des druides* (Paris: Jean Parant, 1585), fo. 84v. The comment, written in a copy of Taillepied's work, is reported in Jacques Lelong, *Bibliothèque historique de la France*, ed. C.-M. Fevret de Fontette, (Paris: Jean-Thomas Herissant, 1768-1778) vol. 1, 230 (art. #3813).
- 21 Cornelius Agrippa, *Paradoxe sur l'incertitude, vanité & abus des sciences*, trans. Louis Turquet de Mayerne (n.p.: [privately printed], 1608) fo. 29r-30r.
- 22 Franklin 89-102; however, Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*, rev. ed. (Assen: Van Gorkum, 1964) 22-25, doubts that Agrippa's book was particularly influential.
- 23 Pierre de la Ramée, *Traicté des façons & coustumes des anciens Gaullois*, trans. Michel de Castelnau (Paris: André Wechel, 1559), fo. 53v; compare with the discussion of the *Res Germanicae* in D'Amico 185-205.
- 24 Louis Turquet de Mayerne, *The General Historie of Spaine*, trans. Edward Grimeston (London: Islip & Eld, 1612) 2.
- 25 Belleforest, vol. 1, fo. B2v; Bernard de Girard Du Haillan, *Histoire Générale de Roys de France* (Paris: Jean Petit Pas, 1616) fo. [2r-3v]; Nicolas Vignier, *La Bibliothèque Historiale*, vol 2 (Paris: Abel l' Angelier, 1588) 25.

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<sup>26</sup> Arthur Ferguson, *Utter Antiquity: Perceptions of Prehistory in Renaissance England* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 93; Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 149-51.